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Libertarians, With Eye on Voters, Debate Need to Be More Radical

By T.R. Reid

Washington Post Staff Writer

DENVER, Aug. 29 — There comes a time in every political party's life when it has to decide whether ideological purity or electoral power is its chief goal. The Libertarian Party, the nation's third-largest and fastest-growing party, has come face to face with that trying decision this weekend.

The burning question at the party's national convention is whether the Libertarians — whose unyielding antigovernment platform calls for legalizing all drugs, bringing all U.S. troops and weapons home from overseas, and abolishing the CIA, the IRS, and the public schools — needs to become "more radical."

"More radical" is the direction prescribed by a large and fervent faction of the party that is sharply critical of the presidential campaign waged last year by Libertarian nominee Ed Clark. These "purists" say that President Reagan, whose antiregulation rhetoric has a somewhat libertarian ring, is a threat to the growth of "true" libertarianism. They say the party's only option is to take a much bolder position, and that Clark failed to do so.

Clark and his supporters respond that the only way a third party can grow is to present gradual proposals for change that will not scare away mainstream voters. A small, intensely ideological party will never change things, Clark told the convention today.

The Libertarians' wrenching debate between principle and pragmatism is crystallized by an angry dispute here that would probably never come up in any other party.

During the 1980 presidential campaign, NBC refused to sell Clark the advertising time he wanted. Clark responded as almost any other party's candidate would: he filed a complaint with the Federal

That action has been condemned here by party theorists who say it is "unlibertarian" to invoke the coercive power of government against a private corporation. Clark's critics say the political need to gain access to a powerful medium of communications did not justify a deviation from party principle.

The FCC controversy is one of the issues at the heart of a hotly contested campaign for the party's chairmanship that may determine the Libertarians' political course for the next four years.

The "purist" faction is backing John Mason, a Denver architect with close ties to Murray Rothbard, a free-market economist who was an intellectual godfather of the nine-year-old party. Mason says he wants to "demonstrate that we are a radical alternative... and go after all the people who dropped out because they were fed up with the two [major] parties."

The proponents of Clark's more cautious approach are split between two candidates. Clark is backing his wife, Alicia, a Los Angeles businesswoman; many of Clark's campaign workers are supporting Kent Guida, a construction executive from Annapolis. The vote will come Sunday. Everyone agrees the race is too close to call.

Both pro- and anti-Clark factions agree that the party has come a considerable distance since it was founded by 85 mostly right-wing ideologues in 1972. It now has about 20,000 active members from both the left and right flanks of the political spectrum.

The party was on the ballot in every state last year, and polls showed that Clark achieved greater name recognition than typical minor-party candidates. Further, the party ran hundreds of candidates for Congress and lower offices. About 25 million people voted for at least one Libertarian candidate, and about a dozen of its nominees —

But there were only a handful of states where the Libertarian slate got more than 2 percent of the vote. Libertarians are the nation's largest minor party, but they are still decidedly "minor."

To become "major," Clark and his allies call for "reasonable" and "gradual" programs. For example, Clark last year took the party's opposition to government-funded pensions and turned it into a detailed proposal to phase out Social Security over the next four decades.

Clark said that approach would win support from younger workers who are wary of the system without terrifying older voters.

Clark's critics say such gradualism will water down what all Libertarians consider their greatest asset: the basic consistency of their antigovernment principles.

Like Reaganite Republicans, Libertarians oppose domestic federal spending and government involvement in business regulation. Unlike Reagan, but like many liberal Democrats, they also oppose defense spending and involvement in foreign countries. And they go further than both parties opposing legal limits on such individual "rights" as abortion and the use of narcotics.

The consistency of that antigovernment stance is reflected in a pair of lapel buttons sported by delegates. One button, a standard item at leftist gatherings, reads "U.S. OUT of South America." The companion button, unique to the Libertarians, reads "U.S. OUT of North America."

In place of government, the Libertarians want individuals and corporations — the "free market" — to educate the young, safeguard public health, and provide for retirees. This principle is so basic to all factions that the party has its own version of a standard joke, to wit: "How many Libertarians does it take to screw in a light bulb?" Answer: "None — the